

Stewardship Homily – Feast of St. Vincent de Paul, 2009

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Vincent de Paul, the patron saint of our parish. When a parish celebrates its patronal feast on a Sunday of Ordinary Time, it takes the place of the Sunday readings and prayers.

Since this is a special day for our parish, it is an ideal time for me to bring to your attention some matters that are important to all of us who love this parish community. Some of it is good news, and some of it is bad news.

The good news is that there are many good things happening in our parish. Many people, with hearts devoted to Our Lord and to his service, are living exemplary Christian lives, gathering regularly to be nourished by the Word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit, they then respond generously to the needs of the parish and the broader human community.

Those who are tuned in to the life of the parish see many of the wonderful projects and ministries that emanate from the heart and soul of this parish, like rays of light emanating from the bright light of Christ. These include on-going projects, like our special relationship with our twin parish in Haiti, Eucharistic ministers to the homebound taking communion to our brothers and sisters week after week, grief ministry for those who have lost loved ones, Elizabeth Ministries looking out for the needs of women, our parish's involvement in the Neighborhood Table, support for our Catholic schools—and the list goes on.

Parishioners readily become involved in other projects and ministries that may come up from time to time. A recent such item is the *One Warm Coat* project. Others are involved in such projects as United Way, Make-a-Difference Day, and the Love Lights Annual Fundraiser, not to mention service on various local councils and boards that support and help to sustain the quality of life we enjoy in this wonderful area. It always does my heart good to see our parishioners living out their faith with such generous gifts of time and talent.

Obviously, the trumpeting of good news could go on at much greater length. Unfortunately, the bad news must also have its due. Most of it is about money, and you really do need to hear what I have to say. However, even here there is good news that deserves telling.

Our parish's participation in the diocese-wide *We Belong to Christ* campaign has borne much good fruit. It is from your contributions to this campaign that have come some wonderful capital improvements to our buildings and grounds:

new energy-efficient windows in the school and great improvements in our parking lot are two of the most notable items. Others will follow, although they may be less noticeable. Besides these *We Belong to Christ* projects, an insurance settlement enabled us to put a new steel roof on the church. This kind of roof has an expected lifetime of about sixty years.

Still, the bad news remains daunting, and it affects all of us. Simply told, the future financial health of the parish is in imminent jeopardy. Our monthly income on average is falling roughly ten thousand dollars short of our monthly expenses. Since expenses have been cut about as much as they can be without negatively affecting the life of the parish, there remains only one answer: parish income must go up.

The bad news also includes some SAD news. At least it certainly makes me sad. The sad news is that many of our parishioners simply don't—or won't—take responsibility for supporting the parish financially. For example, as much good as the *We Belong to Christ* income has done for our parish, only about twenty-six percent of our parish households actually contributed to that campaign. Since I serve on the *We Belong to Christ* board of directors, I happen to know that this is one of the lowest levels—if not *the* lowest—of participation among all the parishes of the diocese. Yes, I know that this campaign came right on the heels of our reordering project, but it still makes me sad that more of our households could not have sacrificed at least a little in order to help our parish and the needs of the diocese.

Here are some specifics. As many of you know, that ten thousand dollar monthly shortfall has forced us to dip into our savings, and now the savings are almost gone. If your giving does not increase, in a few short months we will be unable to meet our regular expenses—much less be able to respond to any emergencies. The parish will begin building up debt at the same rate we are now drawing down savings, and instead of earning interest, we will be paying it. This snowballing of debt and interest is obviously unsustainable.

Our Parish Finance Council and a special *ad hoc* Stewardship and Revenue committee have been working diligently to address this matter. We welcome your suggestions, but we know that there really is only one answer, and that is for every member of our parish family to evaluate or re-evaluate what this parish community means to them.

We realize, too, that, while this is *much* about money, it isn't *all* about money. Perhaps parish leadership, from me on down, has not been diligent enough in

helping to promote a real sense of community. While many visitors have told me that we are a very welcoming community, I've had parishioners tell me that we could do much more. The truth is, this parish needs *all* of us to promote and participate in the many facets of parish life. The more we participate together, the more willing we become to support financially what it is that we believe in.

I want to take a moment to address a special group within our parish family—the elderly and widowed and any others on a fixed income or living near the poverty level. You are often the ones who feel the most sad when you hear a priest speak as I am speaking today. You are also often the ones who feel most guilty, because you feel you are giving so little, and you just can't give any more. Please do not feel sad or guilty. Instead I would like you to accept my thanks and that of all our other parishioners for the love, the generous service and the sacrificial giving with which many of you helped to build up this parish in years past. Our current financial crisis is not your fault, nor do I ask you to solve it. It is up to a new generation of parishioners to willingly sacrifice for the sake of this parish family and the work of the Lord that we are called to do.

Let me lead toward a conclusion by noting that there are some things that we cannot do in order to solve our financial problems.

We cannot arbitrarily decide to stop supporting our Wisconsin Rapids Area Catholic Schools. None of the supporting parishes can just arbitrarily decide to do this.

We cannot simply close up shop—although no one has suggested we do this.

We cannot let our buildings and grounds deteriorate for lack of maintenance.

But there are some things that we *can* do.

First, and most important of all, we can all try harder to build and truly be a community of believers. This means that a parish is not just a church-size filling station or recharging port for an hour-long stopover on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. Rather it is a living community, diverse, but unified in purpose, working together to be Christ to one another and making our parish a focus of Christian energy that flows out into our community.

Along with this need for all of us to be involved in building up our parish community is the need to see the big picture, rather than the small picture.

Withholding contributions to the parish because one disagrees with something I have done or that the parish does with the money has a profoundly hurtful effect on the parish's future. It is part of human life that not all of us agree on

everything, and that's all right. Seeing the big picture means seeing beyond those disagreements and embracing the life and health of our parish family.

While there are many other things that we can do, I'm going to conclude with some thoughts about stewardship. By its very nature, good stewardship is both spiritual and sacrificial. Spiritual because true stewardship doesn't give because there is a need, but because there is a *need to give*. Giving is a grateful response to our God, who has given to us beyond measure. Stewardship is sacrificial because it is essentially unselfish, and all unselfishness is essentially sacrificial.

I have been pastor here for eighteen years and two months. This time has been a great gift to me, and I have come to love you very much. However, I can see that the time is nearing when it will be wise for me to move on to the next phase of my life and ministry. The future of this parish community is largely in your hands, not mine, and that is as it should be. Your response to this call to sacrificial stewardship will help to shape that future.

This week each household in the parish will be receiving a copy of this homily in the mail.

Also included will be a chart showing general levels of giving within the parish and a Notice of Financial Need form to be filled out and returned to the parish.

The form basically asks that each household increase its giving level by \$4 per Sunday. That is the amount deemed necessary by the ad hoc committee and parish finance council to alleviate the current financial crisis. Since that is an average amount, those who are able to manage a greater increase will make up for those who do less.

As we move forward, the finance and pastoral councils will be seeking input and experimenting with ways to promote a more active sense of community in the parish.

I had just about completed my third rewrite of this talk, when I received an email from one of the committee members. Here is what he said, just slightly edited:

“Since you had asked for opinions, and it is so vital to the parish, I have been giving your sermon some more thought. I would like to see you tell it like [it] really is as it pertains to supporting the church.

“...I have this 'thing' about people contributing a buck or two in the collection basket because 1) that is what they always give, or 2) that is all they feel they can 'afford'. But [many of] these same folks think nothing about going out to

McDonalds because they don't feel like cooking, providing cell phones and [text message plans] for their kids, stopping at their favorite bar for a quick beer, going out with the girls [or] guys for lunch instead of brownbagging it, heading out to the casino to do a little gambling, buying the latest electronic gadget or trendy bit of clothing that their ego says they 'need', etc.

“I believe it is time for you to tell us that, while doing these things in themselves is okay, they shouldn't interfere with providing for the support of the Church. It is a matter of priorities. We should be evaluating what ours are, and change where required.”

Now for the last word: Since we're celebrating his feast today, it seems appropriate for that last word to come from our patron, St. Vincent de Paul:

He says: “The first step to be taken by one who wishes to follow Christ is, according to Our Lord's own words, that of renouncing himself - that is, his own senses, his own passions, his own will, his own judgment, and all the movements of nature, making to God a sacrifice of all these things, and of all their acts, which are surely sacrifices very acceptable to the Lord. And we must never grow weary of this; for if anyone having, so to speak, one foot already in Heaven, should abandon this exercise, when the time should come for him to put the other there, he would run much risk of being lost.”

St. Vincent de Paul, model of Christian generosity, pray for us.